

Experience of my famous uncle, Melvin Purvis, with Hoover's jealousy and with Nazi Hermann Göring

S. Robert Lathan, MD

In 1934, *The Literary Digest's* poll of the 10 most famous people in America named Franklin D. Roosevelt number one and Melvin Purvis number two. Purvis, in charge of the Chicago office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), became famous in the 1930s for bringing down the notorious outlaws John Dillinger, Baby Face Nelson, and Pretty Boy Floyd (Figure 1).

Melvin was born in 1903 in the small town of Timmons-ville, South Carolina, with a family of six sisters and two brothers. He was devoted to all his sisters, especially my mother, Callie Mims or "Cal," who was born in 1899. In his 1920 high school yearbook, Melvin was said to be "charming and athletic with his love of horses"; he was said to be a "crack shot," and he later became an avid gun collector. He was also popular, having

been elected captain of his high school military company, and he played football and baseball in Timmons-ville.

He attended the University of South Carolina and joined a fraternity, the Kappa Alpha Order. He then graduated from the University of South Carolina's law school in 1925 and passed the bar. After practicing law for 20 months in Florence, South Carolina (10 miles east of Timmons-ville), he yearned for adventure in the diplomatic service in Washington, DC. Unable to find a position in the Foreign Service, he applied at the FBI.

When Purvis joined the FBI in February 1927, it was under the strong control of John Edgar Hoover, who had been appointed the Bureau's first director 3 years earlier. For the first 3 years of his career, Purvis worked at field offices throughout the US. In November 1930, Hoover designated Purvis special agent in charge of the Cincinnati Bureau. At the age of 27, he was the youngest field office chief in the FBI. Hoover received great reviews of Purvis, who was not only a bright man but also a hard worker and extremely attentive to details. There was no question that Purvis was a rising star.

In 1931, Purvis took over the field office in Washington, DC, and 1 month later assumed control of the Oklahoma City field office. In May 1932, Hoover made him special agent in charge in Birmingham, Alabama. At every stop, inspectors were struck by Melvin's energy and confidence.

In 1932, Hoover's FBI had no greater challenge than the most sinister criminals of Chicago's underworld. To lead this dangerous time, Hoover chose his favorite agent and most dependable man: Melvin Purvis. In October 1932, Purvis was transferred to Chicago with his private secretary, Doris Rogers (later Lockerman), and made special agent in charge in Chicago. Doris Rogers called Melvin a "dapper and elegant dresser, a soft spoken gentleman, charming, young and handsome" and noted that "many of us had crushes on him then."

Purvis later led the manhunts that tracked the most famous outlaws of all time: John Dillinger, called "America's Public Enemy Number One," on July 22, 1934; Pretty Boy Floyd in Ohio on October 20, 1934; and Baby Face Nelson in Illinois on November 29, 1934. Purvis had captured more public enemies



Figure 1. Melvin Purvis a few weeks after the capture of Pretty Boy Floyd, 1934.

Corresponding author: S. Robert Lathan, MD, 122 Old Ivy Road #17, Atlanta, GA 30342 (e-mail: rlathanmd@att.net).

than any other agent in FBI history, in only 4 months—a record that still stands.

Reporters noted an instant liking to the modest Purvis, and the mild-mannered “G-man” became a hero and a celebrity. However, Hoover became very jealous of Purvis’s publicity. He assigned Purvis to demeaning assignments and petty criminals and later depicted Purvis as a “careless and ineffective leader.” Hoover asked that Purvis “lay low” for a few days and keep away from his office so that he would avoid the glory and attention. However, the media requested access to Purvis as well as photos of him, which were routinely denied. Finally, in December 1934, Hoover stripped Purvis of his command of the Chicago office and officially made Purvis “not in charge of the Dillinger case.” Hoover began to gather intelligence about every move Purvis made.

All of this led to Purvis’s resignation in July 1935, 1 year after the Dillinger case. Purvis moved to California, where he passed the bar and lived on Lombard Street in San Francisco. He began endorsing products such as Gillette razors and Dodge cars. He also entered into a contract with General Foods in which the Junior G-men Corps was created with badges in boxes of the popular breakfast cereal Post Toasties. In 1936, Purvis signed on to host a radio show called “Junior G-man: The Melvin Purvis Club.” The G-man Club became the most popular club of its kind, enrolling 260,000 children in the US.

Hollywood called, and Purvis was eager to serve as a technical advisor to several movies. He also briefly dated actress Jean Harlow and was a friend of Clark Gable. Later Purvis was engaged to marry Janice Jarrett, a famous advertising model best known as the Lucky Strike Girl. The wedding was planned for April 29, 1937, in San Antonio, Texas. Purvis had called and written my mother, Cal, and insisted that she and several more sisters attend. Two or three days before the wedding, he told his sisters that he was not sure he wanted to go through with the wedding. The sisters said that if he didn’t want to, he didn’t have to. The wedding was called off.

Melvin left a few days later for New York and then an extended trip to Europe. I have several letters from him to my mother, who seemed to be one of his favorites and the spokesperson for the sisters. Most of the letters were typewritten in hotel stationery but several were in longhand, which showed his incredible penmanship (Figure 2). One letter was typed from Paris on June 13th, stating that he was to travel to Berlin. This led to my first

anecdote, which was an unusual encounter between Purvis and Hermann Göring.

Göring (Figure 3) was born in Germany in 1893 and was a pilot in World War I. He became a leader of the Nazi Party and was named by Hitler in 1933 to create the Gestapo, or secret

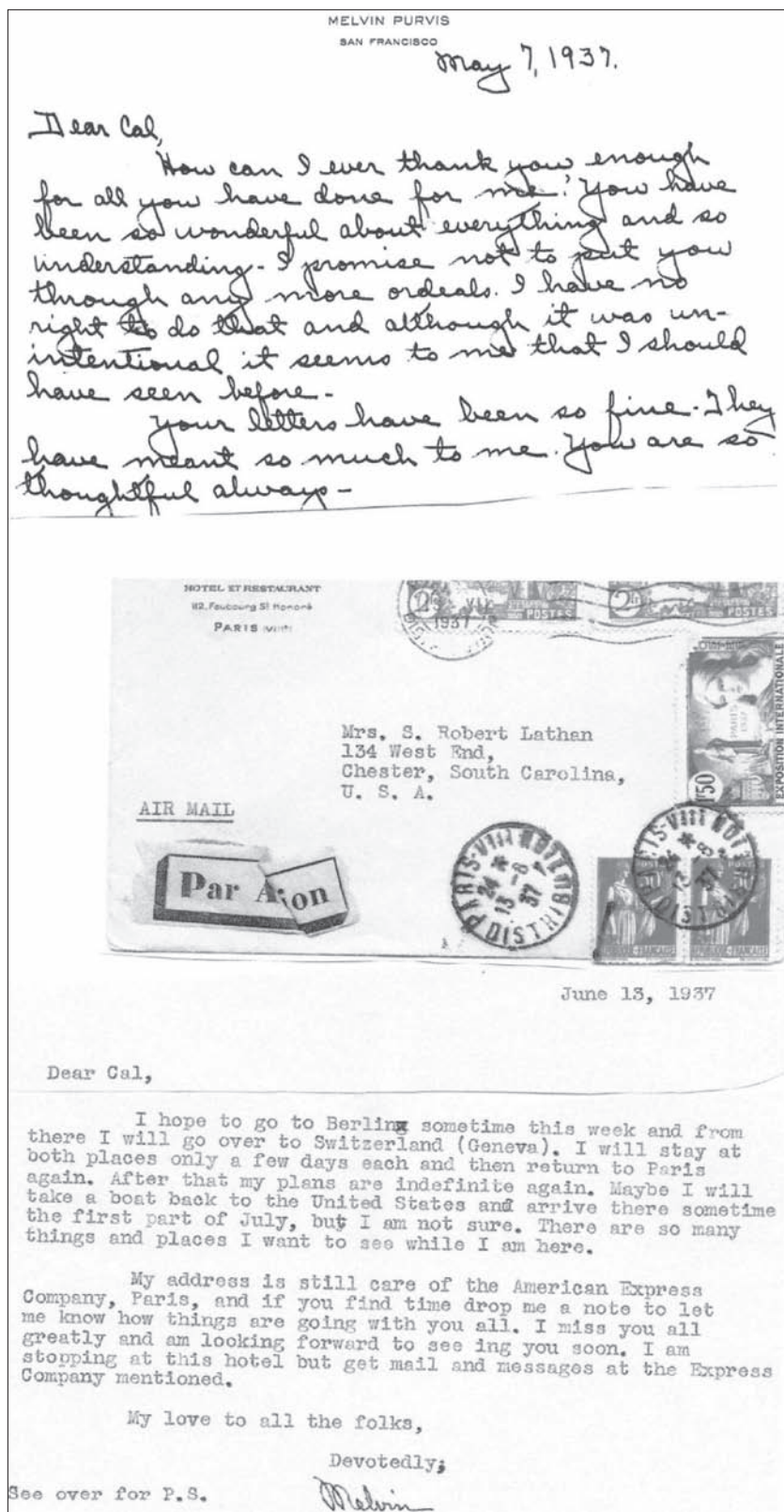


Figure 2. Letters from Melvin Purvis to the writer’s mother, Callie Mims Purvis Lathan.

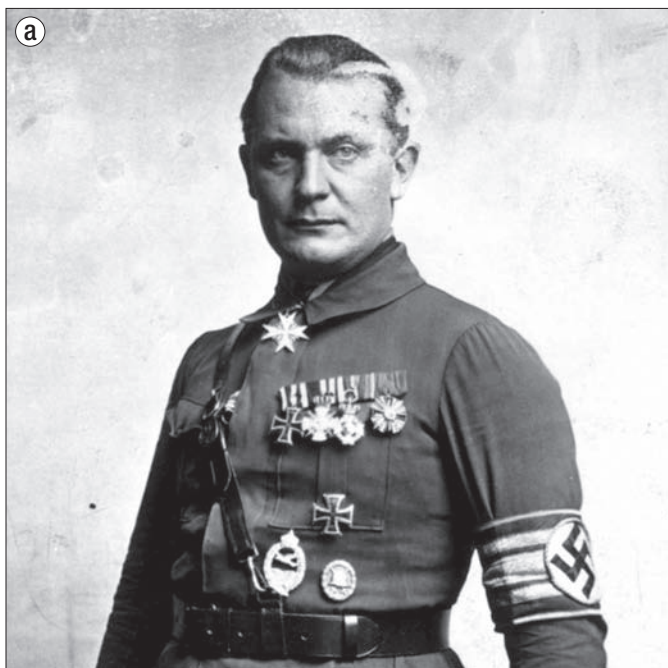


Figure 3. Hermann Göring (a) in his military uniform and (b) as the master huntsman.

political police, and to establish concentration camps. In 1935, Göring took command of the German Air Force (Luftwaffe). Göring was fascinated with American gangsters. In 1935, he heard that Melvin Purvis was in Berlin and rang him at his hotel: “Hallo, beeg G-man,” he said. Göring then invited Purvis to his estate on a wild boar hunt.

“Carinhall” was the country residence of Göring and was built on a large hunting estate northeast of Berlin. It was named in honor of his Swedish first wife, Carin, who had died in 1931. (“Carinhall” later became the destination for many of Göring’s looted art treasures from across occupied Europe.) Göring was the master huntsman of the German Third Reich and had a singular fascination with wild boar hunting with the medieval tradition of using a spear or lance. Melvin Purvis and Hermann Göring stayed at his estate for several days, and Purvis bagged his boar and returned stateside with its tusks and hair from its neck mounted as a memento. Göring also presented him with a sword. Göring was a truly evil and ruthless man, but was one of the last great hunters in the grand tradition. He loved to share the experience of the hunt with his closest friends.

After a few months in Europe, Purvis returned stateside and made his way back West. In 1928, he returned to Florence, South Carolina, and married Rosanne Willcox, his previous sweetheart and the daughter of a prominent lawyer. He published a newspaper and started a radio station and also practiced law. Melvin and Rosanne had three sons: Melvin III, Alston, and Christopher.

The Purvises built their dream home on Cherokee Road in Florence, known as Melrose, which was modeled after a famous mansion in Natchez, Mississippi; the name had a special meaning as it was the combination of their first names. In 1940, Melvin was endorsed by a South Carolina congressman for a federal judgeship but did not get the post, as it was blocked by Hoover.

In 1942, Purvis entered the US Army as a captain and later joined the provost marshal’s office as a major. In 1944, by then a colonel and intelligence officer, he was made the deputy provost marshal general of the European Theater of Operation and had orders to interview General George Patton. Later he was made deputy director of the War Crimes Office, and after V-E day he spent time in Germany to investigate the suicide of Adolf Hitler in 1945.

A second anecdote with Hermann Göring took place in 1946, when he was a war criminal in the Nuremberg trials. Purvis was asked by the War Crimes Office to interrogate him in his cell. At first, Göring recognized Purvis and said, “Oh yes, beeg G-Man!” He asked Purvis if there was any way he could avoid execution, as he did not want to be hanged. Purvis said no. After a brief interrogation by Purvis was completed, on October 15, 1946, the night before his scheduled execution was to take place, Göring swallowed a cyanide capsule in his cell.

In the 1950s, Purvis was appointed by South Carolina Senator Olin D. Johnston as chief counsel to two Senate subcommittees. Also about this time in my teens, I would

spend several days in the Purvis home in Florence, especially with my cousin Melvin III, who was the closest to me in age. “Big Melvin” collected guns, cars, and antiques. He was somewhat small in stature, measuring about 5’9” and 130 lbs. I would always ask Melvin about Dillinger, but he would quickly change the subject. He never talked about the FBI. He never bragged about what he had done. He had charisma and was gentle and generous, always giving us gifts after he returned from a trip.

In 1960, Purvis was suffering from very poor health. On February 29, 1960, while at his home in Florence, he died from a gunshot wound to his head fired from a pistol given to him by his fellow FBI agents in recognition of his time with the Bureau. The FBI investigated his death and declared it a suicide, although the official coroner’s report did not label the cause of death as such. A later investigation suggested that Purvis might have shot himself accidentally by cleaning his gun, trying to remove a tracer bullet that was jammed in the chamber. He was 56 years old.

In the 1990s, I planned an FBI tour while I was in Washington, DC. I told the receptionist at the FBI headquarters that I wanted to see all the information about my uncle, Melvin Purvis. The receptionist said that she didn’t know anything about Purvis and had never heard of him. I was shocked but then asked to see the exhibit on Dillinger. I could not believe that the exhibition included absolutely nothing on Melvin Purvis.

In the late 1990s, I learned that my cousin, Melvin’s middle son, Alston Purvis, was working on a book about his father’s life and wanted to stay with us in Atlanta. Alston spent several hours every day in Atlanta with Doris Lockerman, Melvin’s private secretary in his Chicago office. Even 70 years after their time together in Chicago, Doris remembered every detail of their experience in the 1930s. Doris, who was in her 90s, was a wonderful help to Alston’s project.

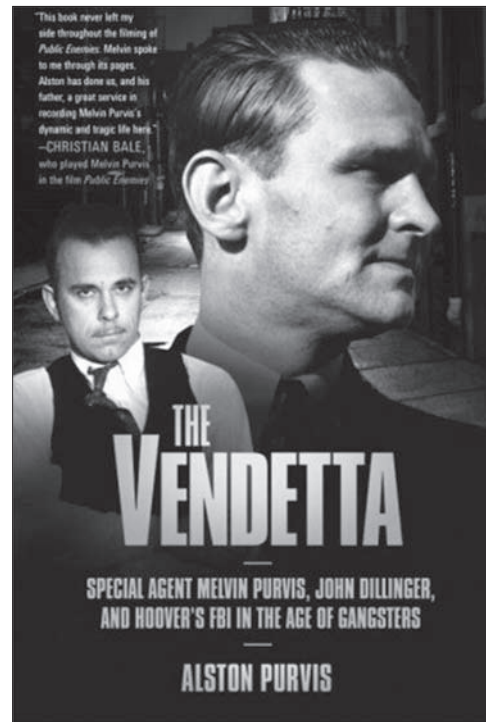


Figure 4. *The Vendetta*, a book about Melvin Purvis written by his son, Alston Purvis.

Alston’s book, *The Vendetta*, was published in 2005 after many years of hard work (Figure 4). Alston is an artist, author, professor, and chairman of the Department of Graphic Design at Boston University. His book is compelling, entertaining, and honest with painstaking and fascinating detail. I reread Alston’s book frequently and found it to be very useful for my article. Alston’s main focus was J. Edgar Hoover’s insane jealousy and anger against Purvis’s newfound fame and his persistent campaign to discredit and smear him. The book is really a story of changing a man from a protégé to an enemy.